DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 398 176 SP 036 777

AUTHOR Handel, Ruth D.
TITLE Teachers as Family Literacy Learners: Report from the Field.
PUB DATE Apr 96
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, April 8-12, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Learning; Elementary Education; Elementary Schools; Family Involvement; Higher Education; Instructional Innovation; *Intergenerational Programs; *Parent Participation; Parent Student Relationship; *Parent Teacher Cooperation; *Parent Workshops; Partnerships in Education; *Reading Instruction; *Teaching Methods; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS Adult Child Relationship; *Family Literacy; Montclair State College NJ; Newark School System NJ

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a field-based effort in which practicing teachers collaborated with a university researcher to develop, inaugurate, and maintain a family literacy program. In this context, family literacy is an intergenerational program serving all members of the family, meeting the needs of adult family members as individuals, not just as caregivers for children. The Partnership for Family Reading is a joint effort of Montclair State University and 34 elementary schools in Newark (New Jersey), an urban district with a low income, minority population. Major activities are: (1) interactive workshops for adults in which they read and discuss children's literature and learn reading comprehension strategies; (2) adult-child book reading at home and school; and (3) staff development. Teachers conduct the workshops at the school site during regular school hours. The data indicated that two of the program goals, increased staff expertise in working with parents and closer home-school relationships, were being furthered. Teachers learned that parents were concerned for their children's welfare, that the adults' progress could enhance the teachers' own sense of professional efficacy, and that closer contact with parents could be a source of personal pleasure without compromising professional expertise. The program was less successful in addressing the issue of what teachers can learn from parents. (Contains 13 references.) (ND)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 398 176

Teachers as Family Literacy Learners: Report from the Field

Ruth D. Handel, Ph.D.
Montclair State University
Department of Reading and Educational Media
Upper Montclair, New Jersey 07043

DRAFT: Please do not quote without permission

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, NY, April 1996

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

[ ] This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

[ ] Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R. D. Handel

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Family literacy programs have proliferated in public schools in recent years, as with parent involvement programs more generally, but little training has been available to prepare teachers to function effectively in the new role of family educator. As an advocate for staff development in this important new arena for educators, recognized in the Goals 2000 legislation, I will describe a field-based effort in which practicing teachers collaborated with a university researcher to develop and refine the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to inaugurate and maintain a family literacy program. I will describe some benefits and limitations of teacher learning in the field-based context, and make brief comparisons with other staff development frameworks, and other types of programs that fall under the family literacy rubric.

Family Literacy - Background and Perspectives

The growth of family literacy programs has been fueled by Federal legislation, such as the Adult Education Acts, Head Start, Library legislation, the Family Support Act, Chapter I, Even Start (see Nickse, 1993) - the funding of many of which is currently problematic. Of these initiatives, Even Start is entirely devoted to family literacy, and is currently funded through the states and local school districts. About 900 such programs have been funded since the Even Start Act went into effect in 1988. In addition, there are many hundreds of programs on the state or local level, some school-based, some community-based, that consider themselves to be family literacy programs.

What is family literacy? That question is often asked because there are confusing definitional issues in a field that developed ad hoc without an explicit theoretical base beyond the well-substantiated concepts that parents affect their children's literacy and that cycles of literacy or failures to become fully literate tend to perpetuate themselves across generations. (see Anderson, 1985; Sticht & MacDonald, 1994). At present, there are several overlapping definitions in use. The first is from an ethnographic perspective;

family literacy is regarded as research on literacy interactions that naturally occur within families. The two other major definitions relate to interventions. They may be characterized as parent involvement programs whose major purpose is to help parents help their children and also support the school; and intergenerational programs that focus on adult literacy learning, that is, fostering literacy for parents or other adult caretakers, together with children's learning.

Intergenerational programs attempt to serve all members of the family, not just the children, and to meet the needs of adult family members as adult individuals, not just as caregivers for children. Since schools and teachers traditionally focus on children as the beneficiaries of adult effort, rather than on service to the adults themselves, intergenerational family literacy programs represent a new and challenging direction. It is the latter type of program, an intergenerational program, that I will be describing in discussing ramifications for teacher education.

The Partnership for Family Reading

The study draws on data from a project, the Partnership for Family Reading, based in 34 elementary schools in Newark, NJ, an urban district with a low income, minority population. The Partnership has been operating since 1987 as a joint effort of Montclair State University and the school district. Major activities of the Partnership are (a) interactive and enjoyable workshops for adults in which they read children's literature, learn reading comprehension strategies, and discuss the books on an adult level; (b) adult-child book reading at home and school; and (c) staff development. Since the workshops for adults are delivered by elementary school teachers at the school site during regular school hours. staff development in working with families was an integral part of the project from its inception. Staff development and program implementation proceeded concurrently in this action research project.

Staff Development

Staff development was designed to help teachers adopt appropriate pedagogy, establish comfortable relationships with parents, and participate in program development. Pragmatic and technical concerns were included also. Staff development was experiential; participation in Family Reading workshop units that the teachers would later facilitate for parents was the major learning mode. The workshops, which combined instruction in cognitive reading strategies with the enjoyment of reading and discussing interesting children's literature, are grounded in theories of intrinsic motivation as well as Vygotskyan and constructivist theories of learning (see Handel, 1992; Handel & Goldsmith, 1994). Overall, the staff development took an interactive research and development perspective (Griffin, Lieberman & Noto, 1982; Tikunoff, Ward & Griffin, 1975) intended to encourage teachers to take leadership in refining the program according to the local conditions of their respective schools (McLaughlin, 1990), to collaborate with other teachers, and to reflect on and evaluate their efforts.

A total of 90 teachers grades K-3 from 34 schools participated in the project over the years 1987 - 1995. The Partnership began with 3 participating schools in AY '87 - '88, enlarged to 18 over the next three years, and grew to 34 schools thereafter. Staff development was provided by myself, central office staff from the District, and increasingly by participating teachers. Teachers from approximately half of the schools, including those from the 3 original schools, have participated for four or more years, amassing considerable expertise.

Staff development for newly enrolled teachers consisted of three full day's training, plus on-site consultation and assistance in conducting the parent workshops. Thereafter together with the other experienced participants they met for two days each year for family literacy up-dates , reflection, and networking; on-site visits were also held. For an analysis of school district factors and their impact on staff development and program operations see Handel (1990).

Methods

Naturalistic, qualitative methodology was used to study teachers as family literacy learners. All activities, settings, and reports of participants were documented from the project's inception. The data base for this paper includes fieldnotes and videotapes of 21 staff development sessions; notes of informal contacts with teachers; 8 sets of teacher surveys; field observations or teacher reports of 27 parent sessions in the schools; and interview and survey data from parents. Content analysis was used to derive results of four open-ended questions asked of 20 teachers in 1992. Subsequent observational and self-report data was analyzed through a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1978).

Results

Open-Ended Questions

The four open-ended questions asked teachers to describe ways, if any,that participation in the Partnership for Family Reading had influenced their (a) relationship or attitude toward parents, (b) relationships with colleagues, (c) classroom activities with students, and (d) activities or attitudes in any other way.

After the written responses were segmented into phrases, content analysis yielded three categories for influence on relationships with parents, one category for influence on relationships with colleagues; four categories for influence on classroom teaching, and . one novel response category for the last question inviting additional comments.

Categories and number of responses appear in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Relationship with Parents. All 20 teachers reported that program participation had influenced their relationship or attitude toward parents. Of the 62 total responses, 31 responses from sixteen teachers were categorized as Professional Growth in

the area of familiarity or competency as a parent educator; those teachers reported that they recruited parents into the program, learned how to make them welcome in school, established "a partnership" with parents, and facilitated their engagement with reading and other subjects. Responses in other areas of Professional Growth indicated greater knowledge of children's literature, confidence in public speaking, and initiation of Family Reading into non-school community settings.

Nineteen responses from 15 teachers were categorized as Parent Changes in which teachers reported greater understanding of teachers' work and of teacher-student relations and "more comfort " in the school setting on the part of parents. The personalized nature of Family Reading workshops was often cited as a reason for these changes..

Six responses fell into the category, Enjoyment of Interaction with Parents. Teachers reported that they liked the personal aspect of the program, liked getting to know the parents and enjoyed planning and spending time with them and seeing the parents' interest in the program.

Relationship with Colleagues. Nineteen of the twenty surveyed teachers reported that participation in Family Reading had influenced their relationship with colleagues in the direction of greater sharing and collegiality. Teachers reported sharing ideas and working together in the program in their respective schools and enjoying the collaborative effort. They pointed out that joint, rather than individual, efforts were needed for program success. Two teachers reported serving as resources to colleagues who were not participating in the program.

Classroom Teaching. All of the surveyed teachers indicated that participation in Family Reading had influenced their classroom teaching or activities with students. Of a total 37 responses, 22 responses from fifteen teachers indicated that the reading strategies incorporated into the program were the primary influence. Responses indicated that teachers were using the strategies in their classroom teaching, some for the first time.

Others were using strategies more often than before, or were more aware of strategies when using them, or felt more confident teaching reading strategies.

Five responses were found in each of the other categories: Story Reading (read stories more often, more aware of the importance of stories); Motivation (students and teacher enjoy using Family Reading methods in classroom); and Understanding Students (understand child in the family context).

Additional Comments. The three novel comments, categorized as Personal Growth, dealt with extending program methodology to teachers' own children.

Post-1992 Surveys and Observations

Analysis of post-1992 data yielded an identification of themes relating to (a) value of the program to teachers (b) professional role and relationships with parents, (c) pedagogy, and (d) individual development.

A summary of results in the above categories follows.

(a) Teacher's voluntary participation in the program, their implementation of the parent workshops despite some daunting obstacles, and the longevity of their participation are evidence that teachers valued the program. Other indicators are their many elaborations upon the basic workshop model (introducing new activities and materials such as games, puppets, family trips to the public library), sharing of new books, and developing new curriculum units for the workshops. In addition, several teachers introduced the program to their church or community groups. Most adapted elements of the workshops for use in their own classrooms. Commonly, for the teachers, program value was linked to the delight they saw on children's faces when they knew their parents were in school and would read to them after the workshop. Conversely, an on-going concern and source of discouragement for teachers was the lack of participation on the part of some parents.

(b) Professional role and relationship with parents. Unsurprisingly, all teachers reported more interest in the adult family members and enjoyed the pleasant, informal contact in the parent workshops. Many saw for the first time that parents wanted to be

involved in their child's education. They noted reported instances of parents seeking further education for themselves, enrolling in other literacy programs, or serving as school aides or volunteers as a result of the program. Reports from parents also attested to the role of the teachers and program in fostering their own adult learning. Reciprocal relationships between teachers and parents emerged. When parents began to ask for book recommendations for their own reading, teachers reported pleasure in this new experience and recognition of their professional expertise. They also reported sharing their own home reading experiences with parents in the workshops.

(c) Adoption of relevant pedagogy appeared influenced by district practices and teachers' longevity in the project. The interactive adult learning model of the workshops was not compatible with the top-down basic skills methods advocated by the district during the first four years of the Partnership. As teachers gained experience in the project and as district policies began to change, teachers were observed to adopt interactive strategies more readily in the staff development sessions. They were not always able to do so with parents, however, reverting to frontal teaching when faced with large groups or other pressures. Predictably, the open-ended discussion aspect of the program was the most difficult for teachers to adopt in both the staff development and parent workshops.

More positively, Family Reading's use of interesting children's books as a learning vehicle aroused vocal enthusiasm and engagement. Teachers reported that they enjoyed reading books to children, but had not been able to justify their use in an educational setting before. They immediately began using them in classrooms and parent workshops. They also brought favorite books to the staff development workshops and shared them eagerly with colleagues.

(d) While individual development overlaps with other categories, I distinguish it here to highlight the interconnectedness of the teacher role with other aspects of an individual's life. Family literacy programs are known for evoking, if not influencing the family lives of program providers; teachers, most of whom live with children, are no

exception. Examples from the Partnership are negative and positive: demands on teachers' time and lack of flexibility because of home responsibilities are illustrated by comments of teachers who cannot do workshops after hours because "We are parents, too, and our own children are coming home." On the positive side, all teacher-parents took Family Reading books home to read and discuss with their children, most crediting the project for showing them new ways to relate to their child.

Discussion

The similarity of teachers' responses and the clustering of responses in the categories would seem to indicate uniformity of program impact across sites and over time. While self-report may not be completely reliable, teachers' expressiveness in describing the influence of their participation in Family Reading provides a foundation for belief. Outside observers as well as this researcher have noted the interest and enthusiasm teachers have demonstrated in the staff development workshops, and the persistence with which they have implemented the program.

The data suggest that two of the program goals, increased staff expertise in working with parents and closer home-school relationships, are being furthered. It would appear that teachers learned first-hand that under-educated parents were concerned for their children's welfare, that the adults' progress could enhance their own sense of professional efficacy, and that closer contact with the parents of their students could be a source of personal pleasure without compromising professional expertise, the last in accord with findings that interaction leads teachers to take a more favorable view of parents (Epstein and Becker, 1982). Recognizing that the adult family members have enhanced their own literacy and learned something important about their role in fostering the literacy development of their children, teachers appear to have grown into an expanded role as parent educators. That was especially welcome in a school district in which such contacts had heretofore been minimal.

The personal pleasure the teachers take in their adult relationships with parents and colleagues in the program also seems important. Family Reading workshops and the collaborative planning it entails may help mitigate the typical isolation of the elementary classroom teacher. Thus the pleasure built into the program content through the use of interesting books and an informal atmosphere in which to discuss them extends out to color and enlarge teachers' relationships in the school setting as a whole.

A major finding - serendipitous perhaps only to the researcher- was the teachers' adoption of Family Reading methodology for teaching reading in classroom settings. It seemed that the staff development for parent workshops inadvertently served a dual purpose with teachers recognizing and validating the use of interactive reading strategies and children's books in the classroom. That suggests that effective staff development for family literacy, or working with parents in other academic areas, should be connected with or adaptable to classroom teaching with students and should accord with teacher beliefs. As reported above, teachers valued children's books, but were unsure how to justify their use in the classroom reading program. Whether the impact would have been as great in a district whose teachers were less tied to basal readers and more familiar with cognitive learning and discussion strategies is an open question. What seems noteworthy is that teachers were able to adopt the new methodology for both parent workshop and classroom learning, and that they began to create participatory learning environments even when the district was wedded to transmittal models of instruction.

Less successfully addressed by the program was the issue of what teachers can learn from parents. Teachers do indeed report learning from their observations of parent-child interaction and have gained insight into the earnest desire of parents to help their children. In the parent workshops, they have heard family stories and learned about home reading practices . However, as has been found from reviews of the family literacy literature (Morrow & Paratore, 1993, p. 198), the prevailing mindset appears to be that

parents learn from schools; there is less attention to developing the reciprocal relationship in which schools and school personnel might learn from families.

Family literacy programs ranging from occasional exhortations to parents to extensive interventions to foster the literacy development of both adults and children have proliferated in schools with few guidelines for teacher education in working with families. Although the benefits of parental support in reading have been well documented (Anderson, 1985) and evaluations of the federal Even Start Family Literacy Program show gains for adults as well as children, the processes by which teachers become family literacy learners has not been well explicated. Drawing on an 8-year history, this study has presented a description of important behaviors and processes in the context of an action research project for practicing teachers. The project is a small one, not amenable to rigorous research, and no claims for generality can be made.

Also unknown is whether the Partnership model would be adaptable to pre-service candidates. Parents have reported the personalized contact with their child's classroom teacher as a benefit of the program, and teacher education students - as indeed some practicing professionals - often express reservations about close and informal relationships with parents. However, at least one national study (Shartrand, Kreider, & Erickson-Warfield, 1994) recommends the use of experiential models for pre-service candidates, and it is possible that concerted efforts on the part of teacher education institutions could overcome barriers. The relative paucity of curricula for teacher preparation in working with parents reflects the fact that only 22 states mention parent involvement in certification requirements for some, not necessarily all, teacher candidates; moreover, those requirements are typically defined in vague or superficial terms (Radcliffe, Malone, & Nathan, 1994; Shartrand, Kreider, & Erickson-Warfield, 1994).

For the at-risk and under-educated families typically addressed by family literacy programs, effective teacher education is particularly needed. Above and beyond the usual issues of distance between the institutions of school and home, missions must be

redefined, staff development in adult learning must be provided, and strategies for working with adults who are experiencing a great deal of life stress need to be developed. The present study has analyzed one attempt to help such schools become learning communities for adults as well as children.

References

Anderson, R.C., Hiebert, E.H,., Scott, J.A., & Wilkinson, I.A. G. (1985). Becoming a nation of readers: The report of the commission on reading. Washington, DC: National Institute of Education.

Epstein, J. L. (1987). Toward a theory of family-school connections: Teacher practices and parent involvement. In K. Hurrelman, F. Kaufman, & F. Losel (Eds.), *Social intervention: Potential and constraints* (pp. 121-136). New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Epstein, J.L , & Becker, H.J. (1982). Teacher practices of parent involvement: Problems and possibilities. *Elementary School Journal, 83*, 103-113.

Griffin, G.A. Lieberman A., & Noto, J.J.(1982). *Interactive research and development on schooling: Final report of the implementation of the strategy*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Handel, R.D. (1990). *Shared visions, double vision, and changing perspectives: A college/school parent participation program.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, April, 1990.

Handel, R.D. (1992). The Partnership for Family Reading: Benefits for families and schools. *The Reading Teacher, 46*, 116-126.

Handel, R.D., & Goldsmith, E. (1994). Family reading - still got it: Adults as learners, literacy resources, and actors in the world. In D. Dickinson (Ed.), *Bridges to literacy: Children, families, and schools* (pp. 150-174). Cambridge MA: Blackwell.

McLaughlin, M. W. (1990). The Rand change agent study revisited: macro perspectives and micro realities. *Educational Researcher*, 19 (9), pp. 11-16.

Morrow, L.M., & Paratore, J,. (1993). Family literacy: Perspective and practices. *The Reading Teacher, 47*, 194-200.

Nickse, R.(1993). *A typology of family and intergenerational literacy programs, Implications for evaluation.* ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 362 766.

Radcliffe, B., Malone, M., & Nathan, J. (1994). *Training for parent partnership: Much more should be done.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Center for School Change.

Shartrand, A., Kreider, H., & Erickson-Warfield, M. (1994).*Preparing teachers to involve parents: A national survey of teacher education programs*. Cambridge MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

Tikunoff, W., Ward, B.A., & Griffin, G.A. (1975). Interactive research and development on teaching study: Final report. San Francisco: Far West Regional Laboratory.

Table 1
Family Reading: Impact on Teachers
(N=20)

Category	Number of Responses
Influence on Relationship with Parents	
Enjoyment of Interaction	6
Parent Changes	19
Professional Growth:	
Parent Educator	31
Other	6
Influence on Relationship with Colleagues	
Sharing and Collegiality	24
No influence	1
Influence on Classroom Teaching	
Strategy Use	22
Story Reading	5
Motivation	5
Understanding Students	5
Additional Influences	
Personal Growth	3